

ETERNUM X

IF you have ever spent the greater part of a stifling hot night being jolted over a sand drifting Western desert in a ramshackle stage, for the most part entertaining your mind with what might happen immediately subsequent to the bursting of a string bound axle, you will appreciate the relief Harding felt when the ancient tonga, which had borne him across the waste of Rajputana, crawled up to the bright splash of shade trees and flowering shrubs surrounding the British Residency at Rahmabad. A letter of urgent invitation had caught him at Bombay, and diverted his course from the usual overland route to Calcutta, thence by way of Singapore on a scientific trip to the Philippines.

Mrs. Mansel, wife of the British Political Resident, and Harding had been old friends in their American home town, which partly explains his invitation to Rahmabad. It was Mrs. Mansel who hastened through the compound to greet him, while he made a hopeless effort to shake the dust of Rajputana from his ducks, realizing the disastrous effect of a night in a tonga on his general appearance. But the warmth of Mrs. Mansel's welcome made him oblivious to his outward state.

"You can't imagine how glad I am to see you, Bert!" she exclaimed, with unrestrained pleasure in tone and expression.

"And how delighted I am to be here with you," he responded, retaining the hand she extended for a moment. At first the idea occurred to him that the climate

of India had not agreed with Mrs. Mansel. He noticed a physical change in her that was hardly for the better since they last met in New York.

"I have a surprise for you," she presently went on, leading toward the Residency bungalow. "Guess what it is, Bert?"

"Can't imagine," he replied. "I know it's my business to solve chemical and other problems; but for the time being that awful tonga has shaken every particle of sense out of me. But, anyway, I'd take forty tonga rides to see you again."

"Well," she smiled appreciatively, "I won't keep you in suspense. Grace is visiting me. She came out two months ago from Europe."

"What! Your sister Grace here? Great Scott! that is an unexpected pleasure!"

A glance toward the veranda moved him to a few hasty strides in that direction, his objective being a girl in a trim riding habit with a pith helmet partly shading attractive features. She had just returned from an early morning canter, and the color in her cheeks was as that of the rose pinned to the breast of her habit.

The heartiness of a meeting between Americans in such circumstances was presently interrupted by the appearance of Colonel Mansel, a sun tanned, well set up figure in undress military uniform. While Harding reciprocated the Colonel's friendly advances, it seemed to him there was something more in the Resident's manner than the Englishman's habitual reserve, a vein somewhere back of him almost suggestive of visionary abstraction. He also noticed that whenever Mrs. Mansel's eyes rested on her husband her face assumed an anxious look. But, presuming that Colonel Mansel's position



Harding sprang on the Brahman without warning.



entailed serious responsibility, Harding dismissed further speculation regarding his host's character with the estimate that he was of a strongly preoccupied disposition, perhaps natural to a man forced to penetrate the wiles of a native court.

Later, after a bath, a change of clothes, and an excellent tiffin, the subject of Colonel Mansel's reserve was introduced by Grace. She had led Harding to a seat in the shade of a tree; but had barely mentioned Colonel Mansel's name when she turned impatiently to a gardener, who had crept up silently with the apparent object of trimming a flower border which manifestly did not require his attention.

“Jao! Be off!” she cried, emphasizing the order with a stamp of her foot.

The gardener salaamed and moved away obediently. “That is the first word you learn here,” she informed Harding, “and necessary when you can't turn your head without finding one of these creatures at your elbow. You feel they are spying on your very thoughts. But to return to Colonel Mansel. Did you notice anything peculiar about him?”

“Why, I thought perhaps he was a trifle absent-minded,” replied Harding.

Grace withdrew into a pensive mood for some moments, and at last spoke seriously with her eyes fixed downward. “If it were only that, it would not matter; but Marion is dreadfully worried about him.”

“I am sorry to hear such news,” remarked Harding sympathetically. “Won't you tell me more about it?”

She looked up and searched his face penetratingly. “I know I can trust you. I know I can rely upon you to help me if I ask.”

"You certainly can," he assured her. "I think I told you long ago there was nothing on earth—"

"Yes," she interrupted; "but that was in reference to another matter. This is to help my sister."

"Well, I shall also help your sister if I am able."

"Yes, that is what I told Marion when I urged her to write to you at Bombay and ask you to visit us here. I am afraid something dreadful is going to happen."

"Why, are these people going to start a second Indian Mutiny?" questioned Harding, with a note of anxiety on his part as the thought of the helplessness of his fellow countrywomen in such an event rushed upon his mind.

"No, it's nothing of that kind; but I'll tell you all we know," she proceeded to explain. "Sometime ago Colonel Mansel began to take an interest in the occult power of the Brahmins. In that way he came in contact with a priest of the temple here called Krishna Bhatta. I have seen the man only once; but he is so like a snake that you feel he might coil himself around your very life. He is so—so horribly unctuous and subtle."

A shudder ran through her frame at the mere recollection of the man. Harding strove to reassure her with a pressure of his hand.

"Well, what did Bhatta do to the Colonel?" he asked.

"In the first place, Bhatta managed to gain a great influence over him," she replied. "And then it seems he used this influence to make Colonel Mansel a strong partisan of the Hindus against the Mohammedans at the court of the Maharaja. This has brought Colonel Mansel into discredit with the Viceroy. Yesterday he received a curt warning from the Political Secretary that further similar actions could not be overlooked."

We are afraid this Bhatta will eventually ruin Colonel Mansel. Marion sent for me to help her; but what can I do among people like these?" she added with a hopeless gesture. "When we heard you were passing through India, I at once begged Marion to write to you."

"I see," nodded Harding thoughtfully. "I'm glad I came, though it certainly looks a puzzling case. But, tell me, in what way does this Bhatta keep his hold over Colonel Mansel? He must exercise some power, money or something."

"That is what we don't know. That is what I wish you to try and discover. All we do know is that Colonel Mansel goes at night to the temple, presumably to meet this man Bhatta. That is very bad for an Englishman. If it were reported to Calcutta, Colonel Mansel would probably lose his position. It must be a mysterious influence that draws him there, though neither Marion nor I can obtain a word from him about it. Can't you do something to help us, Bert?"

Grace's appeal stirred Harding's sense of chivalry, as well as another sentiment regarding her personally. Of course, he was willing to render any assistance; but here was a problem reaching into an entirely unfamiliar field, with a background of oriental things looming dark and sinister upon his imagination. His eyes traveled toward the native gardener pottering among the flowers, and beyond rested on a woman servant passing with a jangle of brass anklets. She instantly veiled her face in the light of his improper glance. That gave the keynote to everything, a veil drawn before the gaze of the secretly hated Occidental.

"Well," he said at last, "I should think the first thing for me to do is to try and get into the Colonel's

confidence, and the way, I guess, will be to display a keen interest in the occult. If he thaws out, I shall probably discover what takes him to the temple, and the source of your snake man's influence over him. In the meantime keep your courage up, Grace, and rely upon it I won't leave you two women to fight this thing out alone. That's about all I know to say to you at present."

That she put much faith in Harding's assurance might have been inferred from the lighter spirit she displayed subsequently when instructing him in the Anglo-Indian game of badminton.

But, in spite of Harding's diplomatic efforts, Colonel Mansel's confidence did not prove easy to gain. As far as hospitality went, he left nothing to be desired, and appeared to take pleasure in showing his guest the sights of Rahmabad, including a presentation to the Maharaja; but he studiously omitted the temple. And it was the temple, of course, that Harding was most eager to inspect with the Colonel. Meanwhile he strove to brighten the spirits of the two women, and picked up a sufficient smattering of the philosophy of *yoga* to open fire with on the Colonel at the first appropriate opportunity.

It came after Mrs. Mansel and her sister had retired for the night, leaving the two men to smoke on the veranda. Reclining in their cane chairs, the dark mass of the compound shrubbery was brilliantly illuminated by intermittent flashes of fireflies, strange birds hopped to the veranda and flapped away again, a jackal howled to his friends news of a feast that one hesitates to mention particularly, and from a shallow tank nearby rose a deafening chorus of frogs. The Colonel inadvertently

gave Harding the opening he sought by remarking that according to local belief the frogs were cursing the gods for not sending rain.

“That’s interesting,” Harding promptly took up the subject. “For a long time I’ve had a keen desire to get in close touch with the folklore and mystic philosophy of the Orient. And, by the way, it’s curious that I should recollect it just at this moment, but there was a swami I met in New York who spoke of the occult power of the Brahmins of Rahmabad. I presume, though, you have not cared to investigate it,” he added with an apparent lack of design that was beautiful in its simplicity.

But, though Harding waited expectantly, Colonel Mansel refused the cue. For several minutes the ends of both men’s cheroots glowed a red hue. Presently Harding stirred slightly in his chair and spoke reflectively.

“That swami was a wonderfully intelligent man. I must confess that before I met him I was skeptical of anything approaching the supernatural; but he gave one or two demonstrations that turned my mind in the opposite direction. I became eager to learn more.”

Again Harding paused, and under his breath anathematized the Colonel’s double lock on his secret. But in a little while a short terse sentence escaped the Colonel’s lips.

“Better not!”

Harding started, and became alert. “You said better not?”

“Yes.”

“But why, may I ask?”

“God knows I have reason enough!” came from the

Colonel's lips almost in a groan of anguish. "Leave it alone, Harding, if you value peace of mind and the happiness of another who is dear to you."

"But suppose I am willing to take the risk?" persisted Harding.

"I simply advise you to give it up."

"Well," said Harding, as if his determination was fixed, "while I appreciate your advice, now that I'm here I guess I'll take that of the swami and find the greater light of Rahmabad."

It was a chance remark; but its effect on the Colonel was instantaneous. He sat up in his chair, turning quickly upon Harding.

"Have you heard of the stone, then?" he questioned tensely.

Harding had no previous idea that there was a precious stone in the case; but he guardedly led the Colonel to infer that the swami had mentioned it.

"Its power and influence are wonderful, miraculous!" ejaculated the Colonel. "It seems to draw one irresistibly toward it."

"Probably that is the feeling that inspires me now," remarked Harding. Though he understood the Hindus attributed supernatural powers, both good and evil, to precious stones, particularly rubies with black spots, he was surprised that a man like Colonel Mansel should yield his mental balance to a bit of scintillating carbon in possession of a band of tricksters. Yet, as his eyes strove to penetrate the blackness beyond the veranda, it seemed laden with that age oppressed weight which no European can explain, though it sinks into the very marrow of his bones.

"If you really have decided to see the stone," said

the Colonel at last in measured accents, "I cannot prevent you; but I warn you beforehand that you will not escape its influence. You will return to it again, I fear, to your misfortune."

"As I said before, I am ready to take the risk," asserted Harding.

The Colonel regarded Harding steadily for a moment. "Would you care to see it now?" he asked.

"I certainly would at any time."

"Very well, let us go, then. Bhatta has been expecting me for several nights; but, as our evening dress is hardly appropriate, suppose we go in and change into something less conspicuous."

In a little while both men reappeared suitably dressed for the venture. It had sunk in Harding's estimation to a mere exhibition of superstition on the Colonel's part. Having seen the stone, he thought it would be a fairly easy matter to dissipate whatever influence it held over the Colonel, and at the same time terminate that of Bhatta. The temple lay amid wide spreading banyan trees on the outskirts of the city, not far distant from the Residency. Harding had passed the temple in the daytime and knew its direction; but in the darkness he kept close at the Colonel's side. As they went along the Colonel related somewhat of the stone's history, how it had been in possession of the Brahmins for thousands of years, according to tradition having originally descended from the gods, and according to a prophecy would at some period be reclaimed by them; all of which impressed Harding as a more or less interesting fairytale.

It lasted until they reached the outer court of the temple, shrouded in profound silence. There the Colonel

bade Harding wait while he went in search of Bhatta. The Colonel was gone but a few minutes when he returned with a sheet draped figure bearing a torch. Of all the unprepossessing countenances a flame had ever illuminated, Harding reckoned Bhatta's as probably the most pronounced. It was certainly a mystery how the Colonel had come to be influenced by such a man, though extreme repulsiveness is well known to possess a fascinating attraction, as one might illustrate by any form of reptile.

No words were passed among the three, Bhatta merely leading the way noiselessly into the temple. The purpose of the torch was presently disclosed, in order to avoid the recumbent figures that seemed to have dropped down on the pavement wherever sleep had overtaken them and lay like corpses. Passing through a small inner court, Bhatta hung the torch on a bracket and entered a narrow passage. This terminated in a sliding stone door. Bhatta drew the door open and motioned the others to enter.

Harding stood transfixed with amazement. He was too deeply impressed with the scene he beheld to take heed of the Colonel's actions, though he retained a vague impression afterward of his companion performing a low obeisance, with Bhatta's sinister figure hovering above him. As far as Harding has been able to explain, he found himself in a comparatively small circular chamber, the walls of which were paneled with some highly polished metal.

In the center, seated on a pedestal, rose a figure of Brahma; not the usual hideous image of that deity, but Brahma in his philosophical attribute of eternal meditation. The hands of the image were held together out-

ward with the palms upraised, and in them reposed what appeared to be a crystal casket containing a glistening white stone, or substance, which shone by its own power with a light that no diamond could produce. And from the casket shot a veritable rain of sparklike projectiles, which spattered on the polished metal paneling of the chamber with noiseless but seemingly terrific force. Neither Harding's body, nor those of the Colonel or Bhatta, offered any resistance to the flashes, which passed through them with the speed of lightning. With the flashes there also appeared to emanate a subtle vapor from the casket, which charged the atmosphere and affected Harding with a peculiar sensation of physical buoyancy. In a silence which was as that of a tomb the dazzling white light which could not be shut out by closing the eyes, the shower of sparks sweeping like meteorites from the heart of an eternal element, the crystal casket upheld by the imposing figure of the Hindu god, were little short of appalling. Harding did not deny to himself that he stood in the presence of a mystery that many besides the Colonel would have regarded with superstitious awe.

They had remained but a few seconds in the chamber, when Bhatta motioned them to withdraw. They departed from the temple in the same manner in which they had arrived, and without Bhatta condescending to exchange a word with Harding. It was in silence, too, that Harding tramped home beside the Colonel; for the influence of the Brahmins' stone remained with him, both as a mental problem and in a physical feeling that he had been temporarily charged with some elemental force.

When they reached the veranda, the Colonel held out his hand to wish Harding good-night.

"Well," he said, "you have seen the stone. Do you doubt its supernatural origin and power?"

"At present," replied Harding, "I should hardly care to hazard an opinion. I will only say I have never witnessed anything like it before."

When Harding reached his room, he flung himself into a chair to bring reason to bear on the situation. He was no longer surprised that a man like Colonel Mansel, devoid of scientific training, should be impressed to the very depths of his being with the apparently magical power of the stone enshrined in such a mysterious setting, and the hold that the Brahmins had gained over him by its possession. To his mind the phenomenon was, of course, capable of a perfectly natural explanation; but one that as yet he was not entirely able to fathom. Yet he must do so to keep his promise to Grace regarding the Colonel's position, and to satisfy an awakened scientific ambition. Gradually he formed a resolution. He must examine the stone more closely, and with no one else present to hinder his actions. He decided to make an attempt the following night. Reasoning that until then little was to be gained by possibly unfounded speculations, he presently dropped off into sleep.

As next morning Colonel Mansel evidently preferred avoiding any reference to the subject of the night, Harding felt that such reticence was best suited to his forthcoming plan. The Colonel might insist on accompanying him, or offer objections to a proceeding that might appear like tempting vengeance from the crystallized power of the universe; but it was necessary to

take Grace partly into his secret. He found an excuse to detach her from the rest of the household, and used the word *jao* vigorously upon her maid, who evinced a disposition to jangle after them into the compound.

"I guess you won't give away a word of what I'm going to tell you, Grace," he began.

"You have found out something, then?" she questioned eagerly in return.

"Well, yes, something; but not all to my satisfaction. I believe I shall be able to clear the thing up and relieve your sister's mind regarding her husband; but to do so I shall have to slip away secretly for a couple of hours to-night, and I had better borrow a native outfit. Can you manage that for me?"

"Yes, I can arrange that with my maid. But will you be in any danger?" she asked in a tone that told more of her feelings toward him than she had ever disclosed before.

"I don't anticipate any ordinary danger," he replied, "though in case of accidents I may take my pistol along. But I want you to keep your sister and the Colonel from gaining any idea of my purpose. I'm merely going to take a look at something in the temple; but I'd just as soon no one but you knew of it. I expect to be back shortly after midnight, and hope to have made a discovery that for a day and a half will startle even the United States.

Grace regarded him with wonder mingled with admiration. "Won't you tell me more about it?" she begged.

"Not just now; but I hope to do so to-morrow. Great Scott! I may have chanced upon— But it's too soon to talk yet."

That evening the sun fell a blood red disk into a bank of purple cloud slowly creeping above the horizon, and purple became the dominant tone tingeing all things in the unendurably oppressive atmosphere. Currents of hot air drifted about aimlessly, carrying with them little whirlwinds of dust. Human beings, animals, and plants drooped with exhaustion. Only the frogs in the tank gave vocal expression to their feelings, presumably still hurling anathema at the gods. Perhaps the gods had heard, and were gathering the elements to try and drown the frogs. The idea prevailed that the frogs would then chuckle hugely, because that was just what they wanted.

At dinner conversation flagged, being chiefly devoted to the utter worthlessness of punka boys. Mrs. Mansel and her sister retired early to their rooms and the Colonel fell into a feverish doze on the veranda. At last he woke to the discovery of Harding's absence.

"Boy," he shouted to a passing khitmutgar, "where is Harding Sahib?"

"Harding Sahib took his gun and has gone to drive away the jackals that disturb his rest," replied the man servant.

"H'm!" mused the Colonel. "He might as well try to drive away the mosquitoes."

Like a shadow the khitmutgar slunk away into the darkness of the compound. "That was a narrow shave," muttered the khitmutgar in plain English, when he gained the road outside the compound.

In such guise Harding picked his way to the temple. More by luck than the service of his eyes he avoided stumbling over the sleeping Brahmins, and reached the narrow passage leading to the sanctuary of the god.

His hand trembled as he groped along the side wall, not from fear, but with deeply stirred emotion. If the theory formed in his mind that the stone of the Brahmins should prove to be even partly composed of a powerful radioactive element, known to exist, but of which not an atom had been seen in pure form, then the scientific discovery of the hour was his.

He drew open the door to behold the same phenomena, the white light gleaming in the crystal casket and the discharge of electric flashes upon the polished metal surface of the chamber. He paused a moment to survey the scene, more marvelous to his scientific understanding than to any lay witness. One step in advance of recent discoveries in the field of radio-activity, and the dream of the old alchemists—the transmutation of metals, even the elixir of life, or, as we put it, the source of life—might be revealed. Was that discovery reserved for him in the Temple of Brahma? He moved toward the outstretched hands of the image, and was startled by a sudden rumble of thunder. It seemed like a supernatural warning; but he quickly tossed the feeling aside.

A stealthy footfall caused him to turn. He found Bhatta confronting him, with malice in his eyes and a snakelike blade held threateningly. Harding did not wait for developments. He sprang upon the Brahmin, grasping the dagger wrist with one hand, and seizing Bhatta's throat with the other to prevent a cry for assistance. Thus the two dropped to the floor, and rolled over in a deadly struggle. Within the room the torrent of sparks continued to splash upon the walls, while thunder crashed overhead. Somehow Harding at last found himself on top of Bhatta, and managed

to wrench the dagger from his grasp. He tossed it with a clatter on the pavement. Then seizing Bhatta's turban, Harding bound the Brahmin securely and gagged his mouth. He sprang to his feet and quickly unwound his own turban. This he wrapped around the crystal casket in the form of a sling. Then he fled.

It was probably due to the sheets of rain and the fury of the storm that he managed to escape from the temple without being intercepted. But he soon found he was in far greater danger from the elements. Flashes of pale blue lightning darted from the pall of cloud overhead, striking the ground all around his splashing, stumbling feet. It blinded his eyes and drove him in a bewildered zigzag course. He fell to the ground once, presumably by accident; otherwise this story would not have been written.

How he reached the Residency compound remained a mystery. He had barely struggled in through the gate, when he saw with consternation Grace hastening toward him. He shouted and waved her back; but in the tumult of things she either did not perceive or was heedless of his warning. A sheet of electric flame suddenly enveloped him. He might still have risked destruction in the desire to hold to his prize; but he was fearful of the imminent peril to Grace. He threw back his hand and hurled the casket from him. It disentangled itself from the folds of the turban, described a scintillating arc of phosphorescent light in the darkness, and fell with a splintering crash on a rock. Harding casting a backward glance over his shoulder as he swept Grace out of danger, saw what seemed to be all the stars in the universe collide and fly upward. At safer



He swept Grace out of danger.

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distance it would have been a most interesting electrical display.

Exhausted and drenched to the skin, he was compelled to put off explanations for the time being to seek his room. During the night the first burst of the monsoon passed over, and temporary peace among the elements was restored.

In spite of his experience, Harding was up at day-break searching in the vicinity of the bursting of the crystal casket. What he found there he produced at breakfast in the form of a nugget of lead.

"There is your supernatural stone, Colonel," he said; "at least, the only part I could find that is left of it in one form."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the Colonel with amazement. "What on earth do you mean, Harding?"

Harding briefly told his adventure, and the double motive that prompted him to the attempt. "But for that thunderstorm last night," he further explained, "we might have retained possession of the most powerful radioactive element imagined by science. Whatever may have been its origin, the prophecy about it came true. The gods or forces of Nature reclaimed their own the moment the crystal casket was shattered. A radioactive element, being a strong conductor of electricity, would naturally attract lightning. The wonder is I escaped."

When all had gathered around the nugget a curious sign was found traced in the lead. It took the form of the swastika or fylfot.

"The Hindu sign of eternity," explained the Colonel.

"Then we will call the element Eternum X," said Harding; "for its vapor bore a shade distinct from

known radioactive bodies. Though it escaped us, it still exists, and we may take the credit of discovery. And now, Grace," he turned to her, "it's for you to say how you would like the nugget set as a souvenir of our—"

"I think," she suggested significantly, "we had better discuss that later."

"True, I guess that would be better, Colonel," he addressed his host. "It seems to me that what you need is relief from this atmosphere. How would it do to apply for leave of absence and come with Grace and—I mean take Mrs. Mansel on a trip to the Philippines? At any rate I can guarantee you a good time there."

The Colonel's face wore an expression of intense relief. "Yes," he said, "that is what I require. I have known other men affected in the same way who have stayed too long in this country. It's best not to dabble in things you don't understand. Fortunately you did understand in this case." He stretched out his hand to grasp Harding's. "I owe you more than thanks for dispelling a cloud which hung over me."

"Just put it down to a course in natural science and chemistry at the university," replied Harding. "That's all there is to it, Colonel, except a great stroke of luck for me."

When he said this he happened to be looking at Grace,